

A HISTORY OF MANNING CLARK

(cover story, *The National Times*, week ending 2 June 1978, pp. 18-23)

THE MAKING OF MANNING CLARK

By ROB PASCOE

Early one morning in November, 1938, a 23-year-old history student got out of the train at Bonn Railway Station. Manning Clark was fresh out of the University of Melbourne, full of socialist and Freudian ideas about what was wrong with the world and how it should be improved.

The night before he alighted at that station roving gangs of Nazi stormtroopers had smashed up every Jewish business house in Bonn and elsewhere in Germany.

Clark made his way amid the debris throughout Bonn in a state of disbelief. "That was the beginning of an awakening", he recalled recently. "That was the moment when I realised that I would have to start to think again about the whole human situation."

Clark was born the second son of an Anglican clergyman in Sydney in March 1915. His parents named him Charles Manning Hope Clark, a resounding enough emblem of this ecclesiastical background. An uncle and an older brother followed this clerical tradition, but Clark decided at a young age that God's emissaries in Australia had either misunderstood the religious needs of the people or were misrepresenting what there was to know and preach about man, his relations with others, and nature.

Clark's earliest childhood memory is that of watching a plane fly over Sydney when he was four. This, he later discovered, was the culmination of Ross Smith's famous flight from England in a Vickers Vimy biplane. According to Clark family folklore the young Manning uttered some profound remark about the significance of the aeroplane, just as Henry Lawson in the 1880s had predicted that the "golden days" of the outback were ended with the coming of the railway: "The mighty Bush with iron rails, Is tethered to the world."

When Clark was seven his father took the family south to Phillip Island in Victoria to preach his ministry among the local populace of the "wind-swept, arid,

poverty-stricken but very lovely island in Westernport,” as Clark would later remember it.

Phillip Island was then not connected by a bridge at San Remo to the mainland: it was a rude, almost barbaric, outpost of European civilisation in Australia. Pauperised families scratched a meagre income from the soil, interrupted only by the January migration of wealthy Melburnians who sought a quiet place to escape the boardroom and stock exchange by fishing and drinking.

Some indication of Clark’s early life there is provided in stories he had written in the late 1950s and early 1960s – under the title of *Disquiet and Other Stories* (Angus and Robertson). These stories are thinly disguised autobiography and suggest how Clark in later life understood the young “Charles Hogan” growing up in Cowes on Phillip Island in 1922 as the favourite son of Rev Thomas Hogan.

This was a community still plagued with disquiet about the carnage of the war. The village idiot of Cowes, Billy Gossop, muses over his beer in the Phillip Island hotel bar that “if we can’t face the truth about the dead, how are we ever going to face the truth about the living?” Gossop’s mates were of the Australian variety: they could tolerate his eccentricities only while the cool amber fluid flowed through them. In the cold sober light of day he became the fool again.

There were other inconsistencies in the adult society around the young Clark which added to his realisation that things were not as they should have been. Each summer a distinguished university professor would holiday at Cowes and befriend the Reverend’s son.

But this man of public grace and wit shared a desperate secret with the boy: he would send him off to the hotel with 2/6 to buy half a bottle of spirits. Then just as the boy was about to run off to perform his errand the professor would call out that he had another 2/6 for a full bottle.

Experiences such as these tormented the young Clark: “In childhood I had noticed in adults that gap between profession and performance. Such a gap is unforgivable to a child. He is not ready then to exercise that understanding and forgiveness which comes later in life.”

Phillip Island in the 1920s was a twentieth-century version of the late nineteenth-century Australian outback, a pocket of an earlier age where “bush barbarians” still ranged, largely untouched by urban industrial civilisation. It is not

surprising that Clark later said that the family's transition to Melbourne made him feel like "a simple boy from the Australian bush who goes down to the suburbs."

In one of his short stories, Clark described his new life at Melbourne Grammar School. He was an introverted child who could not fraternise with the sons of the wealthy, producing a sense of alienation superbly captured in the scene of schoolboys barracking during the 1928 public school rowing regatta:

"And he would have joined in with them – one part of him, urged, 'Have a go –surrender... lose yourself with your own' – but another side of him said that to do so would mean identifying oneself with one side, becoming part of the show, and so ceasing to be an observer of life. What he wanted then most passionately was to see it all, to drink it all in, to be at one with all the world before him and not be identified with any part of it."

This conviction strengthened during his years at Melbourne University during the 1930s, for there he met many young intellectuals who had an answer for this alienation, this feeling that not all was right with the world.

Freethinkers such as "Steve Parsons" – as Clark calls him in a short story – preached in the cafeteria and in the pubs that "heaven and hell were priests' inventions," that the natural sexual urges of the people were stifled so that they would divert their energies into hard work, that once the exploitative social relations characteristic of capitalism were abolished a free society would emerge.

These Freudian and Marxist ideas momentarily swept away his Christian theories about the nature and cause of human evil. As Clark recently said: "It was immensely comforting to mix with men and women who believed that a day would come when the 'shits' no longer told us what to do, or how to behave, or what to believe. In Melbourne in those giddy days we were all great haters, and very gullible."

Clark also learnt a great deal from his history teachers at Melbourne University. Sir Ernest Scott, professor of history from 1914 to 1936, emphasised the importance of historical documents as a way of getting to the bottom of things, of stripping away mythologised versions of the past.

Scott's successor, Max Crawford, probably had a more lasting effect on Clark. Crawford's definition of the historian's purpose closely met the needs of the young scholar in Clark.

An analysis by Geoffrey Serle of the students in the History Department of Melbourne University has shown that many were sons of clergy or were otherwise keen to reform the world. Crawford taught his pupils that they had to keep fact and judgment scrupulously apart. They had to bring to their study of the past and the present a suspension of their own values.

It was only in assessing the specific actions and ideas of the people they were studying that they were permitted to canvass the various options open to each historical actor in his specific historical juncture. Then, and only then, could they as observers of humanity's fickleness and grandeur proceed to deliver judgment on others.

This formula excited the young Clark. As he later wrote, he and his fellow students "had been taken up on to a high mountain, and promised that Clio (the muse of history) would help us see "all the kingdoms of the world."

After his visit to Bonn, and a year at Balliol College in Oxford, Clark returned to Australia and taught at Geelong Grammar School in 1940.

He was unable to enlist in the war because of poor health.

It was there that he wrote his first published piece, a short commentary on the mateship tradition in Australia entitled *A Letter to Tom Collins*. It appeared in *Meanjin* in 1943. Mateship was a noble ethos, he wrote, for it promised a society of mates and equals, but it was also a naïve gesture which did more to comfort men than propel them to create a socialist society where equality was genuine.

According to someone who taught with him, his colleagues at Geelong thought he was a "commie b..." yet in criticising mateship he was hitting at one of the sacred cows of the left-wingers.

This has been the paradox of his intellectual life, that for some he is a moralising conservative and for others an iconoclastic radical. It is too simple to say he has veered to the right and to the left in different periods, moving haphazardly backwards and forwards along the ideological spectrum.

It is more accurate to say that he thinks so deeply about social and political issues that he presents himself publicly as many kinds of men at once, "sometimes appearing to speak in the language of the Right, sometimes of the Left," Michael Roe one of his ex-students wrote recently.

The criticisms of his new biography of Henry Lawson made by Professor Colin Roderick have to be understood in this light, for they imply a simple equation of Clark with the left-wing intelligentsia which does not stand up when Clark's overall intellectual development is examined.

Similarly the attacks made on him by Senator Carrick in Federal Parliament in September 1976 just before his Boyer lectures on the ABC implied that he was a simple-minded apologist for the ALP. Perhaps the dominant view of Australian politics is so simple we find it too difficult to understand someone who speaks in such apocalyptic language.

In 1939 he had married Dymphna Lodewyckx, the daughter of a Belgian scholar and a gifted linguist. The Lodewyckx family were emigrants in the 30s who remained concerned with the great questions raised by their experience in the old world.

After the war the Clarks settled among their generation's counter-culture in the Dandenong ranges outside Melbourne. These escapees from the deadening monotony of urban civilisation absorbed themselves in handicrafts, basket-weaving and armchair socialism, hoping to create among themselves an alternative to the levelling mediocrity of a society which prided itself on its ruthless egalitarianism.

This escapism was fraught with its own dangers, Clark realised, for it served to establish a new elite and hardened the gap between the intellectuals and the people.

But Clark has always respected such nonconformists. In his writing he hopes to speak to and for these people, the tolerant and creative middle-class families who feel cut off from the banality of their society but do not necessarily have a clear direction or ideology to guide their lives. Clustered in small communities such as Bega, NSW, Eltham, Victoria, or Darlington, WA, these sculptors, artists and middle-class professionals are the people upon whom Clark relies for his encouragement.

Not all his fellow academics fall into this category. Clark wanted to leave schoolteaching to teach university history but could not persuade the history department at Melbourne University that he deserved an appointment. So in 1944 he settled for what he saw as second-best, a lectureship in political science, until he could prove himself and move into a senior lectureship in 1946.

The University of Melbourne history department in the 1940s was the seedbed for many of the country's leading intellectuals, including Hugh Stretton, Ian Turner, Ken Inglis, Geoffrey Blainey, John Mulvaney and many others. This is a formidable list of alumni and suggests why Clark has often referred to this period as one of the most exciting stages in his development.

The students were exciting learners to be with, and Clark has often said that he also learnt a great deal from them. But the academics! There were days, Clark said recently, "when one could be pardoned for thinking that the aim of a university education was to train men – yes, and women, too – in the skills of tormenting each other..."

The more mundane of his confreres in the historical profession he has caustically dubbed as workers in Historical Studies Pty Ltd, mere hacks who wrote and thought mechanistically. Whenever he publishes he takes scant of academic reviews.

This probably explains his silence on those occasions, like the present controversy over the Lawson book, when his history is subjected to public criticism.

It is the "second wave," the letters from his wider reading public and the comments from those whose opinion he trusts, that he is anxious to receive.

At the end of the 1940s a number of events coincided which would profoundly affect Clark. He accepted a professorship of history at the new Canberra University College (he has lived in Canberra ever since) which was a dependency of Melbourne University until its amalgamation with the Australian National University a decade later.

But this did not free him from the academics at Melbourne: every year he had to make the journey south to present his results for approval.

In June 1949 he began work on his first major research undertaking, a compilation of historical source-materials for *Select Documents in Australian History*. In doing this he was not only proving himself a worthy student of Scott but also, more importantly, taking a great gamble: that the history of Australia was a worthwhile field of study, that he should spend his intellectual energies on a society which many other historians saw simply as an outgrowth of western civilisation.

The two volumes of this work were published in 1950 and in 1955 and each has been reprinted about 10 times since. For a broad selection of excerpts about nineteenth-century life in Australia they have yet to be superseded.

The defeat of the Chifley Government in December 1949 was also important for Clark, as it was a sign that the days of experiment were over. For Clark and many intellectuals of this generation, the post-war Government had been vigorously embarking upon the reconstruction of a better society.

Living in Canberra gave the opportunity of watching at first-hand the new Prime Minister, and he trembled at the rapidity with which Menzies was taking Australia back into what he saw as the Dark Ages.

The Menzies Government also “put on the Vladimir Petrov show,” as Clark called it. “I happened to attend the opening of this show in the Albert Hall in Canberra... What was depressing was it was exploited not to attack communists, but to destroy a man of stature – H. V. Evatt – and to frighten fellow-travellers into disowning the Communist Party, and so shedding their radicalism.”

Not only did society condone this political stunt that spelt the demise of Evatt, it was also led astray by the anti-communist hysteria which resulted from the Korean War. Clark later wrote that “conservatism was much more deeply rooted in Australia than those who, like myself, subscribed to the radical-nationalist theme, were prepared to admit.”

By the mid-1950s Clark had become, as his former student, Michael Roe, now professor of history at the University of Tasmania and author of *Quest for Authority in Eastern Australia 1835-57*, described him in a recent *Quadrant* article, an “alienated rebel of the Cold War years.” During these “years of unleavened bread” – the phrase is Clark’s – he busied himself teaching and researching Australian history.

He was regarded as something of an eccentric, peddling around Canberra on a bicycle in a black suit and wide-brimmed hat and sporting an unfashionable goatee. Students found him personally engaging but an intellectually overawing teacher, especially with his memorable question in tutorials: “And what have you got to say about Australian history, Miss Jones?”

The years 1954 and 1955 probably mark the low-point in this despondency about Australian society, for at this time he wrote that none of the established ideologies could guide progressive men any longer. As an ideal, liberalism was

bankrupt, he felt, mainly because it assumed that greater happiness was the result of greater material progress.

The type of Marxism dominant then, thought Clark, was crude in its understanding of the complexities of the human psyche and social relations generally; it was also naïve to the extent that it embraced the old myth that Australians were typically mates and progressive democrats.

Clark began thinking seriously about starting his writing of Australia's history. As he remembered in 1969: "When I started the first volume I meant it to be a sort of textbook... I suddenly realised that I couldn't write a textbook, I wasn't really interested in doing that. What interested me was the story of it... I would start again and... write a narrative history."

He began writing short stories, presumably partly to understand his own origins and partly to practise the craft of the story-teller. The earlier two volumes of *A History of Australia* would most patently reflect this interest in evoking a description of people and places.

But Clark had more to say than mere biography. He wanted to write about eternal questions of human nature and the answers religious and ideological "believers" had propounded about them. This meant tracing Protestantism, Catholicism and the enlightenment back to their European roots, and attempting to avoid idle sectarianism. In 1956 he visited England, Ireland and the Continent to begin Volume 1.

With a tolerance remarkable for the son of an Anglican clergyman, Clark was dismayed by the suppression of Irish Catholics by English Protestants.

He narrated the coming to Australia of representatives of various belief-systems, so that volume one of *A History of Australia* when it eventually found publication in 1962 became a story of the three great faiths which divided men at the turn of the eighteenth century: Protestantism, Catholicism and the enlightenment.

It was more than this and it was also less than this. It was less than this because Clark did not make his deeply felt convictions about the barbarity of the protestant ascendancy openly public. His feelings for the victims of this ascendancy and his disdain for their material achievements only become obvious between the lines.

It was more than simply a story of faiths because Clark gave life and even romance to the early period of European settlement in Australia. Readers who had grown up with a distaste for the dull version of Australian history popular in their school days – “one damn Land Act after another” – found in Clark’s writings a history that was populated. It was history with the lives of real people breathed into it.

For many professional historians this was a bad book, full of factual inaccuracies. The most savage review of any history book in Australia was prompted by Volume I: Malcolm Ellis reviewed it for *The Bulletin* on September 22, 1962, saying it was “history without facts.”

Ellis accused Clark of errors in dates and places, of devoting excessive attention to some aspects and not enough to others, and of neglecting some important primary sources. The review was two pages long and not one single positive remark was made about the book.

Ellis was a professional historian, but not an academic. Some academics also berated the book publicly; others muttered in tearoom conversations about it. But there could be no stopping the book, and it chalked up runaway sales figures.

The following year Clark finally published a textbook, entitled *A Short History of Australia*, with a North American publisher, and this also proved highly successful.

During the 1960s Clark grew in professional stature and became more widely known among the general public, partly because of his appearance in a weekly ABC television series, *Behind The legend*, about famous nineteenth-century Australians. Slowly he was finding he had something to say publicly.

By the mid-1960s, too, many of Clark’s students from the late 1940s at Melbourne had become prominent in their respective professions. Frank Crowley, his first MA student, for example, had become professor of history at the University of New South Wales.

A crop of Clark students from the ANU, notably Ruth Night, Michael Roe, John Molony and John Barrett, were also commencing their careers as historians. The men who doubted Clark’s promise in the mid-1940s now had to eat their words.

Yet none of Clark’s students have succeeded in writing history with the mastery of their mentor, and part of the reason is the difficulty of matching his

formidable understanding of the great theoreticians, novelists, musicians and dramatists of Western culture. Perhaps Marx, Lenin, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Bach and Ibsen, together with the biblical heritage of his adolescence, are his greatest teachers.

These were the classic thinkers whom Dymphna Clark loved, and Clark's understanding of them no doubt owes much to her learning.

Another difficulty for those students who have or might intend to follow Clark has been that his aphoristic gothic prose style is inimitable. His style is indivisible from the man himself and reflects his role as moralist and prophet of our times.

By the late 1960s he was beginning to think he could speak out, that he not only had something to say but knew that some people would listen.

Since 1972 he has been saying publicly that the best chance for Australia to avoid the extremes of petit-bourgeois reaction and the greyness of communism would be through the election of the Australian Labor Party.

Just before the 1974 Federal election, Clark appeared on stage at the Sydney Opera House with some of the men for whom he has enormous, unbounded respect, including Gough Whitlam and Patrick White, to campaign for the ALP.

It was a rare experience for him: standing alongside those men and speaking to the audience thronging the hall and the forecourt outside undoubtedly gave him the confidence that here, at last, were men and women of such enthusiastic goodwill that mountains could be moved.

His books continue to prosper, and, after retiring in 1975 from teaching at the ANU, the creative spirit within him has been let loose. Volume III of *A History* appeared in 1973, Volume IV was published in March, and 100 typewritten pages of the fifth and final volume have already been completed.

His history is less biographical in content now, mainly because he is writing about Australia in more populated periods and therefore needs to be more economical in the space he can devote to personalities. It is also more honest: it is the history he wants to write.

Possibly to make up for this lack of personalities, Clark has begun several biographical projects. The first, *In Search of Henry Lawson*, was published by Macmillan in April. It gives a close, sympathetic appraisal of the man without being

suffocating, enabling anyone familiar with his fiction to locate the various shifts in his thinking within a broader biographical context.

It is also remarkable for the fact that Clark has attempted to yoke two previously separate enterprises: to write a story about Lawson's personal life and to give an account of his literature. Denton Prout and Colin Roderick had attempted each of these tasks but no one had done both before in the same book.

Clark has decided that his next two will concern W.C. Wentworth and Sir Henry Parkes; an interesting choice, for these were precisely the two "Dionysian figures" whom Ellis dreamt of writing about before he died.

Biography fascinates Clark because it gives the historian opportunity to concentrate on what he has come to see as the great choice, whether mankind's lot can be improved by reform, such as public ownership, or whether there is something unchanging about human nature.

His intellectual life can be seen as the exploration of this choice; only one side of him said "that there were certain things from eternity which would never change, that there was no person, no group, no class who could make the crooked straight." Biography that is true to its subject gives the author and his readers some measure of the intractability of being human.

In September Clark leaves Australia to take up a six-month appointment as the first professor of Australian studies at Harvard University; he leaves behind a society which he believes is on the brink of civil war.

He prophesies that if the conservatives try to suppress progressive movements in this country it will lead to the undoing of us all. People of goodwill and civilised habits will rise up and use violent methods to sweep the rulers into "the dustbin of history." Barbarians will merge out of this chaos and erect a people's dictatorship.

Clark sincerely fears for the sort of Australia which would follow, and the type of doctrinaire history which would justify such a revolution.